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ABSTRACT

Designed for high school students interested in careers in special education and related services, this leaflet outlines the role of the paraeducator. It addresses the nature of the work, the education required, personal qualities that paraeducators should have, job outlook and advancement, how to prepare for a career as a paraeducator, and related careers. Paraeducators are described as key classroom support personnel who assist the classroom teacher in small group and instructional lessons. Paraeducators are often called upon to deliver the lessons, grade homework and standardized tests, participate in classroom activities, and generally support students and teachers. Paraeducators are frequently assigned to general education teachers who have inclusive classrooms. Some states have certification procedures for paraeducators, but most do not. Much of the training that paraeducators receive is done on the job by teachers and other paraeducators. Paraeducators are described as enjoying children and willing to assist and support the teacher in creating a healthy learning environment. The demand for other paraprofessionals in physical therapy, speech-language pathology, and occupational therapy is highlighted, and a profile of a technology specialist is provided to illustrate the challenges and benefits of the job. (CR)

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CAREERS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION AND RELATED SERVICES

Paraeducator

Paraprofessionals, teacher's aides, educational assistants, instructional assistants, paraeducators—these different job titles (and there are more) reflect the variety of roles and responsibilities of this key member of the special education team. Today's paraeducator may be found in a prekindergarten class for children with special needs, out in the community serving as a job coach for a student with developmental disabilities, in a resource room for adolescents with learning disabilities, or in a 4th-grade classroom that contains some students with and without special needs. In short, paraeducators are present in most educational settings, under the supervision of the teacher, and they have skills and contributions that make them highly valued and sought after in education.

Nature of Work

Today's students come to school with so many needs—from how to ask a question, to how to read, to how to get along with their peers. The classroom teacher, with an ever-lengthening student roster, cannot do it all, so the paraeducator becomes the key assistant and support person. From grading papers to delivering lessons to one-on-one help for a student, the paraeducator assists the classroom teacher in small group and instructional lessons. Paraeducators are often called upon to deliver the lessons, grade homework and standardized tests, participate in classroom activities, and in general "be there" for the students and the teacher.

There are currently more than 500,000 full- and part-time paraeducators working in public and private schools. It is estimated that at least one third of all teachers receive assistance from a paraeducator.

A paraeducator has almost unimaginable duties. The different needs of each community or school district may also dictate the particular types of services provided by the paraeducator. For example, in California, where there are a large number of non-English-speaking students, the paraeducators are often bilingual when the teacher is not. There are more paraeducators in elementary than secondary schools and more in cities and large towns than in rural and small town schools.

Paraeducators are frequently assigned to general education teachers who have inclusive classrooms, classrooms that contain all children including those with disabilities. When a general education teacher is faced with his or her usual number of general education students, plus students with special needs, many school districts assign paraeducators to assist the teacher in the delivery of instruction. Paraeducators generally work under the supervision of the teacher. "Para" means "along side of" and like paralegals and paramedics, paraeducators assist and support in a variety of ways.

Typical tasks for paraeducators include performing instructional activities planned by the teacher, giving the teacher feedback on students' progress, and assisting in clerical duties. In an ordinary day, a paraeducator might take attendance, tutor a child in a particular skill, monitor the lunchroom, or assist the teacher in administering a test. When the

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students have gone home, paraeducators work with the teacher on plans for the next day or week. Some paraeducators are assigned to help two or more teachers, but this trend in "sharing the assistant" is steadily declining.

Education Required

Some states have certification procedures for paraeducators but most do not. Roughly 70% to 90% of paraeducators are hired without prior training. Much of the training that paraeducators receive is done on the job, by the teachers and other paraeducators. In addition, some school districts provide formal inservice sessions to enhance the training paraeducators receive from teachers.

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Some districts do provide a career ladder or tier program where paraeducators are encouraged to move along the ladder or up to the next tier with adequate training and compensation. Paraeducators are being required to tackle more complex tasks in the teaching arena, and some districts are trying to acknowledge this by providing tiers that recognize these evolving roles. In some cases, the first tier may even be called teacher's aide or another term with "paraeducator" being reserved for higher and more complex and rewarding tiers. There is a slowly growing awareness of the multiplicity of roles that paraeducators play and to recognize them accordingly. Some school districts, working with colleges and universities, develop programs that focus on moving the paraeducator through training and college courses to a teaching position.

Personal Qualities

The duties of paraeducators are as diverse as the children they teach, so the qualities that make a good paraeducator are varied. Common characteristics include an enjoyment of children and a willingness to assist and support the teacher in creating a healthy learning environment. Paraeducators are dedicated to helping students develop and can adapt to a variety of teaching styles. They are flexible and resourceful and collaborate well with teachers and other paraeducators.

Often paraeducators become a link between the school and the community. Some inner-city schools specifically seek to hire neighbors and parent volunteers as paraeducators. Not only can this provide employment in typically high unemployment areas, but these paraeducators are also familiar with the students and the sometimes harsh conditions typically encountered.

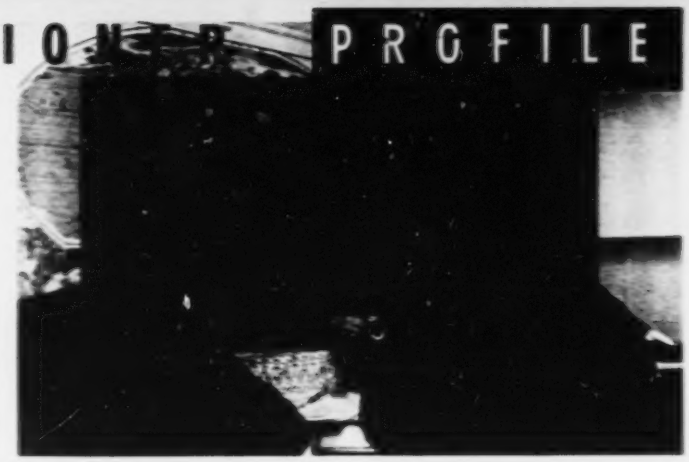
Job Outlook and Advancement

First introduced in large numbers during the teacher shortage following World War II, paraeducators are still in demand and opportunities for employment are growing. A recently released government report on employment outlook listed "teacher's aide" as one of 20 occupations that will make up half of all employment growth through the year 2005.

A few states have programs to recruit paraeducators and to assist them in achieving certification as a teacher. There is currently a shortage of teachers and one way that some states have addressed this is to encourage qualified paraeducators to become certified teachers.

However, there is a demand for paraeducators in their own right. The pay scale of a paraeducator is lower than that of a teacher. Some school systems ease the dual problems of large enrollments and reduced funding by hiring paraeducators. Paraeducators are also often reflective of the diverse ethnic, racial, and language minorities present in the community. As such, these paraeducators are in high demand and can form an important connection between the community and the school.

PRACTITIONER PROFILE



Arlene Baressi

Paraeducator

Eastern Suffolk BOCES, New York

Arlene Baressi started out as a school secretary who wanted some extra money to pay for her daughter's dance lessons and some other extras for her family. She enjoyed her fast-paced job but found herself entering the classrooms every chance she got. Finally, her principal suggested she try her hand at being a teacher's assistant (now called paraeducator) since she was always in the classroom anyway.

The next school year Arlene found herself assisting with prekindergarten kids. There were 16 young children in the class, some with disabilities and some not, from various economic backgrounds. Her training in those early years was strictly of the on-the-job variety. She helped the teacher with everything from zipping up coats in the wintertime to helping with academic tasks such as beginning math and color recognition. She also became involved in training paraeducators and the teachers' union.

Twenty-five years later Arlene is still enjoying her career as a paraeducator. She now works with 14- to 21-year-olds in a residential drug rehabilitation facility. There are three classrooms within the facility and teenagers usually stay from 12 to 18 months.

Along the way, Arlene went back to school and got her associate's degree. Today Arlene spends 25% of her time training other paraeducators who receive credits, release time, and a stipend from the school district for their training. The rest of her time is spent working with and for the students.

Arlene's workday runs from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. She assists the teacher, Al, on an as-needed basis. The students receive instruction in a variety of academic subjects because they carry on their academic work from the home high school. The teacher may ask Arlene to take one of their six students into another room for intensive drill in math or reading. She may grade some papers or deliver a lesson to three students while Al works with the other three. She also has a meeting every morning for about 30 minutes with the director of the alcohol and drug rehabilitation program, the facility's therapist, and the house manager. These brief, daily meetings are to make sure that everyone involved with the residents is up-to-date on how each resident is doing in all areas: drug rehab, academics, discipline, and so forth. Then it's back to the classroom, a quick lunch, and some more academics.

Arlene knows she is an integral part of the education team. In fact, she feels the greatest challenge facing paraeducators is to be recognized as such. "The public in general talk about the schools and education reform but the focus is always on the teacher." Yet in her district, there are 630 paraeducators and 800 teachers. Obviously, paraeducators are an important part of the educational process.

Arlene thoroughly enjoys being a paraeducator. She points out that "not all paraeducators want to be teachers. I like what I do. Every day allows an opportunity for growth both for me and the kids." It is because of her strong feelings about the paraeducator's role that Arlene has gotten involved in training. She has trained 70 fellow paraeducators to be mentors who now help other paraeducators. She feels the future lies with these key educators.

Rewards come in the day-to-day improvements she sees in the students. One 16-year-old boy continued to swear for a few days even after she talked to him about language and the proper use of it. However, within a week he was finding suitable alternatives for those words. "He never acknowledged our talk but I know I helped because he stopped using obscene words and substituted acceptable ones. This will help him not only here, but out in the world. There are so many things that need to be taught, and the paraeducator is right there with the kids day in and day out. This gives us so many ways and opportunities to 'teach' and not just academics either."

How to Prepare for a Career

The best way to find out what it is like to be a paraeducator is to try it out. Teachers are almost always willing to have a volunteer help them. This is an excellent way to observe what goes on in a classroom and get familiar with the work of a paraeducator. You can also help someone teach a class at his or her church, lead a scout troop, or work with other youth groups. An opportunity to help work with children, and especially children with disabilities, can provide excellent experience.

Related Careers

Just as assistance in the classroom is becoming more and more common and sought after, demand for other paraprofessional helpers is growing in numbers. Occupational Therapy Assistants, Physical Therapy Assistants, and Speech-Language Pathology Assistants are needed throughout the U.S. In fact, the government figures for the 10 fastest growing jobs through the year 2005 include occupational therapy assistants and physical therapy assistants.

As their titles implies, these assistants help the therapist work with clients. Therapists are concerned with the treatment and rehabilitation of persons with mental, emotional, and physical disabilities. Occupational therapy personnel help both adults and young people gain or regain the skills they need for independent living and gainful employment. Physical therapists and their assistants help individuals recover from a disease or injury, working together with the client to relieve pain and make the injured area as strong as possible. Speech-Language pathology personnel work with those who are either born with or later suffer language and/or speech disorders.

These therapy personnel, including assistants, can be found in many settings from hospitals to schools. Most assistant positions require certification and 2 years of college courses. The professional associations listed below can also provide information on training requirements and employment outlook.

*R*esource Information

The National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education
1920 Association Drive
Reston, VA 20191-1589
1-800-641-7824
E-mail: ncpse@cec.sped.org
URL: http://www.cec.sped.org/ncpse.htm

National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education
CASE (CUNY)
25 West 43rd Street, Suite 620
New York, NY 10036
212-642-2948

American Occupational Therapy Association
1383 Piccard Drive, Suite 301
Rockville, MD 20850
301-652-2682
URL: http://www.aota.org

American Physical Therapy Association
1111 North Fairfax Street
Alexandria, VA 22314
800-999-2782
URL: http://www.apta.org

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
10801 Rockville Pike
Rockville, MD 20852
800-638-8255
URL: http://www.asha.org

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